The Relationship of the Rights and Responsibilities of the Individual to Public School Education— Its Meaning for the Nation

Reprinted from **Rights and Responsibilities,** Copyrighted Proceedings of a November 1978 conference sponsored by Center for Study of the American Experience, The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Southern California.

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln might well have added to those words spoken at Gettysburg, "and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights."

Five score and fifteen years later, as we begin America's third century, we need to reexamine our commitment to those principles of liberty, equality and inalienable rights. We need to pause, as Lincoln paused on the battlefield at Gettysburg, to consider the import of those principles in a nation beset by doubts, confused by criticism, torn by disagreement and threatened by those of little faith. We need to pause and ask ourselves, "What of the rights and responsibilities of the individual—rights which descend from the blessings of liberty, responsibilities which accompany citizenship in a nation dedicated to freedom and equality?"

We, as educators and concerned citizens, must pause to ask ourselves, "What of publicly suported schools—are they fulfilling the hopes of those who saw education as the keystone in the arch of self-government? Have they contributed to fulfillment of the promise that all men 'have certain inherent rights, among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness'?"[1]

This conference on the "Rights and Responsibilities of the Individual" seems an appropriate place to ponder these questions. The faith of the people in the efficacy of organized education is indeed humbling. The responsibility placed upon education to preserve democracy and human rights is indeed awesome.

Historical Tradition: Education for Democracy

Those who composed the Declaration of Independence and those who shared the framing of the Constitution eleven years later believed, as Jefferson wrote, "that man was a rational animal, endowed by nature with rights. . . , that men habituated to thinking for themselves and to follow their reason as guide would be more easily and safely governed than by minds nourished in error and vitiated and debased . . . by ignorance."[2]

Habituated to thinking for themselves, able to follow their reason—such capabilities demand not only universal public education, but *effective* education. It is little wonder that most of the men who officiated at the birth of a nation conceived in liberty argued for the establishment of publicly supported schools. As Jefferson pointed out, "By that part of our plan which prescribes the selection of genius from among the classes of the poor, we hope to avail the state of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as among the rich, but which perish without use."[3]

"Any nation," Jefferson wrote, "that expects to be ignorant and free expects what never was and never will be."[4]

The promotion of universal education was not limited to Jefferson. Washington in his Farewell Address urged establishment of institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. "In proportion," he said, "as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened."[5]

John Adams, who feared the excesses of democracy, was firm in his conviction that, "The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expense of it."

There is little need to belabor the point—the founders of this nation supported education for all those who would inherit the rights of free men, for all those who would enjoy the blessings of liberty. They knew that freedom and ignorance could not exist side by side. They knew that rights to liberty, property and happiness couldn't long endure if minds were nourished in error and debased by ignorance.

Even before the Constitution was framed, Congress wrote into Article Three of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 an endorsement of education and an implicit delegation of the responsibility to state and local government to provide it. The language of Article Three may not be explicit as to *means,* but it leaves no doubt as to intent: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and to the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged."

Under the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the United States, framed that same year, the establishment of schools and encouragement of the means of education were rights and responsibilities left to the states and, through them, to local governments.

As the nation grew and new communities were formed, the school, the churches and the general store became symbols of America's priorities. The general store represented the forces of individualism; the churches represented the forces of factionalism; and the school represented the forces of joint responsibility. Only the school crossed all lines and bound the community together; established by the community, supported by the community, governed by representatives chosen by the community, the school served all of the children. In those simpler times, the common school had an accepted purpose—to train future generations to carry on the responsibilities of free men. Nation building required a common language, a common loyalty and a common heritage. Where better to ensure those ends than in the common school?

Local citizens joined to build the school, select the teachers and

determine what should be taught. Local control of education was virtually unhampered by state law or professional expertise. There was general community acceptance of its responsibility for the right of the individual to secure a basic education, and community involvement in the management of schools reflected that responsibility.

For nearly half our nation's history, schools operated on the dual premises of local responsibility and political purpose. Immigrants were turned into Americans, the poor became supporters and participants in the nation's industrial growth. From the roots of society, through the efforts and the efficacy of the common school, came the middle class—the inventors, entrepreneurs, politicians, scientists, writers and artists who made real the dreams of Jefferson, Washington, Adams, Franklin and their fellow revolutionaries.

As society became more complex, as communities grew to urban centers, full local control and support of schools became unmanageable. Ward politics turned the schools into opportunities for graft rather than for education. The pendulum swung full arc, pushed by public outrage.

Before long, responsibility for education was divided between the state government and a rapidly emerging new professional--the educator. Parents and taxpayers furnished the raw material and the resources, and the public school system, governed primarily by state legislatures and managed by professionals, made educational decisions for the local community. Most individuals still had the right to a free public education, but responsibility for the educational process, content and result was taken away from the lay public and the parents. If Johnny can't read, it is hard to find anyone today who will accept responsibility for his failure.

Our challenge now is to develop new mechanisms so that those who provide the raw materials and the resources have some voice in what is happening within the education system and some feeling of responsibility for results.

Education Today: Where Are Individual Rights?

In school districts serving thousands of youngsters, there is no way for every parent and taxpayer to be heard at the district level. In a society where professionalization builds an impenetrable barrier

around our institutions, it becomes very difficult to find people who are both sensitive to the rights of the individual and who have the authority to make the system responsive to those rights. That problem is not limited to schools, of course, but it is most critical in the field of education, because there the victim—the child—is powerless.

If we, as parents and concerned citizens, sit by, limiting expression of our discontent to talking back to our television sets, nothing will change. We are deluding ourselves if we think that our representatives in legislative bodies will read our minds and do what is best for the children. Of course we have faith in education. Of course we want public schools to be adequately funded. Of course we don't mean that public schools are to be crippled when we stage taxpayer revolts and demand that the fat be cut from government. Yet we let the lobbyists for special interests influence the distribution of increasingly scarce public resources. Such a failure to speak out leaves legislative bodies free to respond only to the voices they hear.

We are *not* powerless. We have a responsibility to ourselves, our children and the future of this nation to make certain that educational systems are adequately funded and responsive to the rights of each individual.

We have the power to bring the locus of educational decision making down from the halls of Congress, down from the halls of state legislatures, down from the administrative offices of the school district to the place where student and teacher meet, to the point where learning takes place, to the school itself. We have the power, in spite of the growth of massive bureaucracies, in spite of voices concerned only with special interests, in spite of those who would de-school America, to affect the educational process. It is our responsibility to use that power to make our schools what they must be if they are to continue as the keystone in the arch of self-government.

Let me hasten to add that I do not count myself among the critics of the American educational system. I do not join the pack of detractors who would have us believe that our schools are failing. America's schools aren't failing—for the majority of the nation's children they are highly successful.

A century ago, one American in five was illiterate; today, only one

American in a hundred over the age of 14 is unable to read or write. In 1910, only 13.5 percent of the country's adult population completed the twelfth grade; today, nearly 24 percent have completed four or more years of college, and 84 percent of the adult population have completed high school.[6]

When a major television network asked recently, "Is Anybody Out There Learning?" the investigative reporters found that 15 percent of the millions of students attending our schools aren't doing too well. If this is true, it means that 85 percent of those students are doing just fine, but the reporters failed to acknowledge that.

Figures are cold symbols of the personal progress of millions of Americans along the path of education. Statistics give little indication of America's shift during the twentieth century from an agrarian economy to a position of leadership among industrial and scientific communities everywhere. Literacy rates and grades of schooling completed are only proxies for a standard of living and an opportunity for upward mobility which are the envy of the world.

In the face of the progress and the prosperity that are the norm for the majority of American families regardless of color or ethnic origin, how can one doubt the success of American education in achieving economic and social purposes?

In the light of our political stability, despite recent crises of leadership, how can anyone doubt the success of American education is achieving its political purpose?

No, American schools have not failed. Education has not been limited to some elite group, leaving the rights of the poor and minorities unmet. Our public school system has worked hard to fulfill the dream of the founders of this nation *and* the mandate of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* to provide equal educational opportunities for all children. But that doesn't mean that we're relieved of our responsibility for its continued success.

Responsive Education Through Individual Responsibility

As successful as schools are, they can and must be made better. To stop improving, to stop searching for better methods, is to condemn schools to certain obsolescence. No one who cares about the rights

of the individual, no one who cares about the future of our 200-year-old experiment with self-government, no one who shares the faith of the founders of America in "reason, progress and common humanity" would tolerate the destruction of our public school system.

But—how can we improve education so that we may continue to discharge our responsibility to protect the rights of the individual and to preserve liberty and freedom?

First, we must make certain that those who exercise the franchise, those who draft initiative measures, those who sit in the halls of the legislatures and Congress understand the *true purpose* of education. We must make certain that those who would sacrifice the future for a tax cut today understand that the true purpose of education is to educate man*kind*, not man*power*—to unlock the vast potential of our most fundamental resource, the human mind.

We can survive as a nation with less energy, with depleted natural resources, with less of almost everything—but *we can't survive without creative minds, without participating and productive citizens, capable of self-government in the face of all odds.* That means we must with single-minded determination be champions of the rights of the individual. We must see every child as a potential solver of world problems, as a potential Einstein or Madame Curie, as a potential finger on the nuclear trigger.

That is our primary responsibility—educator, parent, concerned citizen alike.

Second, we, as champions of the rights of the individual, must see that those rights are protected and enlarged. We must see that each child's unique needs are met and that no public school system is permitted to grow into a bureaucratic monster that forces the child to fit the system or fail.

We must continue to work until we're certain that we are fulfilling the true purpose of education, that we are, in truth, unlocking the potential of each human mind. We must not turn aside until we are certain that the schools are teaching children not only how to use the basic tools of learning proficiently, but also how to think creatively and critically; how to solve problems and get along well with others;

how to make decisions and accept the consequences of actions; how to listen as well as to speak; how to value the diversity of others and to cherish and nurture their own self-esteem.

If the schools are to achieve these purposes, they must be more than a collection of classrooms and courses. They must be filled with opportunities for real-life experiences and with practical application of acquired skills, just as Benjamin Franklin advocated more than two centuries ago.[7]

Schools must be places where proficiency, not merely competency, is the primary criterion for achievement. They must be places where learning, not simply the accumulation of units, seat hours or grades, is the desired objective. Schools must be places where tests are given, not to prove what a youngster knows or doesn't know at the end of a course, but what he needs to know in order to attain proficiency in a skill essential to "perform basic public responsibilities. . . ; to awaken him to cultural values. . . ; to prepare him for later professional training. . . ; to help him adjust normally to his environment. . . ; to succeed in life" to quote from the decision of the learned justices of the Supreme Court of the United States in *Brown v. Board of Education.*

We have a responsibility in this regard to insist that a school encompass the whole community in the learning process. We must insist that parents be included as partners of the school, rather than its adversaries. We must insist that there be no moat filled with the sharks of educational jargon or the piranhas of educational process separating the school from the lay community.

Let me give you an example of the kind of barriers that exist between parents and schools in all too many communities.

> A Houston, Texas, father recently received a message from the principal of his son's high school—a man who, no doubt, had at least one advanced degree from an institution of higher education. The message read: "Our school's cross-graded multiethnic, individualized learning program is designed to enhance the concept of an open-ended learning program with emphasis on a continuum of multi-ethnic, academically enriched learning using the identified intellectually gifted child as the agent or director of his own learning. Major emphasis is on cross-graded, multi-ethnic learning with the main

objective being to learn respect for the uniqueness of a person."

The father, speaking for all parents everywhere, replied: "I have a college degree, speak two foreign languages and four Indian dialects, have been to a number of county fairs and three goat ropings, but I haven't the faintest idea as to what the hell you are talking about. Do you?"

We must insist that there is some apparent relationship between what is taught and the right of each and every individual to develop to his/her full potential.

Finally, we have a responsibility to see that the needs of minorities in the school population are met—not with token response, but with effective programs.

Robert Maynard Hutchins said a half-century ago, "Education is an act of faith and I have faith that no child is ineducable. . ."[8]

Translating that faith into reality is our responsibility as educators and concerned citizens of a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Every child, rich or poor, minority or majority, advantaged or disadvantaged, has a right to an education that meets his/her unique needs and develops his/her full potential. Every individual has a right to an education that provides an equal opportunity to compete for places in the world of work or the world of higher education.

To offer double standards for admission to colleges and universities on the mistaken premise that only by such acts of charity can minorities qualify, to offer minorities a "back door" entry to future success, is to shirk our responsibility to respect the rights of the individual.

To perpetuate an underclass that can gain employment only through "affirmative action programs" because its members, through little fault of their own, are "qualifiable" rather than qualified is, again, to evade our responsibilities to the rights of the individual.

To exclude the severely handicapped from education because we aren't prepared to meet their needs is an equally serious avoidance of our responsibility to respect the rights of every individual—a denial of the basic premise of equality.

Too frequently, as we follow the beacon of democracy, we shape our course to satisfy the needs and the will of the majority and neglect those whose needs are greatest.

We have a responsibility to heed the caution given us by Jefferson in his first Inaugural Address:

> All . . . will bear in mind this sacred principle that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will, to be rightfull, must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate would be oppression.[9]

In Lincoln's time our nation couldn't survive half free, half slave. It can't survive now, as we face the potential social, economic and political crises of the world, part educated and part ignorant. Every individual has an equal right to an education that allows the full development of his/her potential. Anything less is a denial of rights and a guarantee that the individual will be less able to fulfill his/her responsibilities as a citizen.

Ahead to Basics

If there is any doubt about the grave import of our responsibilities for the future welfare of the nation, we have only to look back a decade. In the 1960s, riots in our major cities and assassinations of national leaders aroused serious doubts about the viability of the faith of our founders in the individual as a rational animal, a creature capable of self-government. Out of the turmoil and doubt came questions concerning the value of education. Students rebelled and rioted, tearing down educational fortresses, defying our well-intentioned efforts to mold them into the citizens of yesteryear. They demanded courses relevant to their time and to their future needs. In too many instances, we gave them not better, but easier, courses; not relevant, but ridiculous, responses; not intellectual nourishment, but mental junk food. We, in our panic, heard their cries but misread their meaning.

Now, all across America, irate taxpayers are echoing almost the same demands. They are demanding that we go back to basics; the taxpayers of tomorrow are demanding that we go *ahead* to basics, that we give them proficiency not only in the basic tools of learning but in the essential skills they will need to participate in and con-

tribute to the world of the twenty-first century. In short, the taxpayers of today *and tomorrow* are demanding that we respect their rights—including the right to *effective* education.

If we are going to meet those demands, citizens, parents and educators must cease to be critics and adversaries and come together in a constructive partnership designed to bring our schools to standards of excellence, to make certain that schools achieve their public purpose as keystone in the arch of self-government:

- Nothing less will brighten the image of the public school system.
- Nothing less will restore education to its rightful place in the list of public priorities.
- Nothing less will preserve the rights and liberties of the individual.
- Nothing less will keep the dream of freedom and equality alive in these United States.

Notes

1. "Virginia Declaration of Rights," quoted in Henry Steele Commager, *Empire of Reason*, Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978, p. 242.
2. Thomas Jefferson to Justice Johnson, *ibid.*, p. 44.
3. Thomas Jefferson in "Notes on Virginia," *ibid.*, pp. 135-36.
4. Thomas Jefferson in a letter to Colonel Charles Yancey, quoted in John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations* (14th ed.), Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968, p. 473.
5. George Washington, "Farewell Address," *An American Primer*, Daniel J. Boorstin (ed.), New York: New American Library, 1968, p. 222.
6. U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education, 1976*, pp. 233-34.
7. Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, New York: Viking Press, p. 191.
8. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *Education and the Social Order*, Los Angeles: Modern Forum, 1936, p. 12.
9. Thomas Jefferson, "Inaugural Address," *An American Primer*, Daniel J. Boorstin (ed.), New York: New American Library, 1968, p. 232.

Comment

Benjamin DeMott

Obviously, I admire Dr. Riles' optimism and his hostility to jargon. I admire his understanding of the mandate of the founding fathers, and most of all, I admire his rejection of the impotence syndrome that touches not only this state, but many others. I have one or two minor carps—who would not, being a professor and earning his living by carping?

Certainly I would want to ask about college and the increasing numbers of people who have the advantages, as we say, of college education. What exactly does a college education mean? In connection with that, I put a question about whether we are indeed more knowledgeable than our fathers and our grandfathers. I am not certain that there has not been a significant degradation of the skills of the worker over the past 150 years and I think that point has to be given some weight.

I'd also say that while I share the sense that we should talk more often about the 85 percent who succeed, should talk more often about the three out of four who learn to read and have passed the test, we should be more worried now about the other 15 percent. I think a great deal has been learned over the past fifteen years about learning problems. One of the most troubling things for someone who teaches my subject, English, is that a good deal of the best work that has been done in the last fifteen years has suffered terribly from failure of dissemination. All the work of Goodman in the teaching of remedial reading; the work of Professor Myra Shaughnessy at the City University of New York in the teaching of writing, represent extraordinary breakthroughs in these fields and yet, if you do as I've been doing, if you move about through the lower schools of the country, you find that scarcely anyone is even aware that such work has in fact been done. Hardly anyone is aware of how much more can be done with a person who is confronted with learning difficulties than is presently being done.

These are, as I said, minor carps. The theme that most mattered in Dr. Riles' talk, was the notion of seeking to reinvigor-